May 4, 2020

Carole Johnson

NJ Commissioner of Human Services

222 S Warren St

Trenton, NJ 08608

Re: Coronavirus Testing in Group Homes and other residences.

Dear Commissioner Johnson:

We are writing on behalf of the Alliance Center for Independence (ACI), a 501 (c)(3) non-profit organization that assists people with disabilities and their families in Middlesex, Union and Somerset counties. ACI is one of 11 centers for Independent living in NJ. We are mandated to provide information and referral services, peer support, advocacy, independent living services and transition services.

Since Hurricane Irene, ACI has also worked to ensure that people with disabilities are not forgotten during an emergency or crisis. The coronavirus pandemic crisis is no exception.

Since early March, ACI has continued to operate our food pantry, made close to 3500 wellness calls to our consumers and contacted over 1500 people on the Middlesex Office of Emergency Management’s Registered Ready list to offer assistance and services. ACI, along with other organizations in NJ, has been closely following the state’s response during the coronavirus pandemic, especially with regards to people with disabilities. ACI has advocated to ensure that people with disabilities have access to the resources and services.

I am writing to express our concern over the lack of available testing for DSP staff and residents of licensed community settings, skilled nursing facilities (SNF), and developmental centers operated by the NJ Division of Developmental Centers. As you know, people who live in congregate are especially vulnerable to this disease. According to the DDD COVID19 Dashboard of April 26, there were 353 residents of licensed community settings and SNFs tested positive for coronavirus; while 34 individuals died. In developmental centers, out of a population of 1,238, 250 residents have been tested positive, while 13 have died. (For staff, the numbers are 181 positive, with no deaths).

ACI calls on the state Department of Human Services and NJ Division of Developmental Disabilities to make testing (perhaps through swab testing) of **all** residents, whether symptoms are present or not, of group homes, SNFs and developmental centers and other housing programs operated by DDD a priority. A coordinated system of distribution of PPEs to these settings also needs to be conducted.

Recently, a staff member at ACI delivered several dozen masks and gloves to a group home for medically fragile individuals in Metuchen. Without ACI’s assistance and advocacy, those vital supplies would not have made its way to that home.

During the crisis, ACI has worked closely with the Governor’s office, the Office of Emergency Management, the NJ Department of Health, and Middlesex County Office on Aging and Disabled Services, among other agencies, on a number of important issues surrounding people with disabilities and the pandemic, including food insecurity issues, allocation of critical care resources, hospitalization visitation, and the lack of availability of PPE for direct service personnel and individuals.

As we continue our efforts in the months ahead, we look forward to working with you and your staff on these other crucial issues facing people with disabilities and their families.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Carole Tonks Luke Koppisch

Executive Director Deputy Director